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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003383

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#) [ELEC](#) [UNREST](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: INFO MINISTER BEREKET SAY GOE OPEN TO
REFORM -- AFTER PARLIAMENT IS SEATED

REF: A. ADDIS ABABA 3277

[1](#)B. ADDIS ABABA 3250

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: GOE Minister of Information Bereket Simon told Charge Sept. 15 that the GOE would consider steps to restore confidence in Ethiopian democratic institutions, but only after the opposition agrees to participate in Parliament. He welcomed the Ambassadors' Donors Group (ADG) statement and the Carter Center draft report he had seen, indicating that there was much to learn from such advice when offered "in good faith." He questioned the opposition's democratic credentials, criticized its proposals, and claimed that there were no trustworthy moderates with whom the GOE could deal. Former leaders from the DERG regime were steadily taking control of the opposition, he said. Bereket claimed that the opposition's real strategy was not to negotiate for reform, but rather to provoke a skirmish in the streets with security forces in the hope that it could force the EPRDF from power. Bereket reaffirmed the GOE's vocation for democratization and sustainable development, and promised that the opposition would have a real voice in parliament -- if it shows up. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Charge made an introductory call on Minister of Information Bereket Simon Sept. 15, accompanied by Pol/Econ Counselor Kevin Sullivan. Bereket has served as the public face and senior negotiator for the GOE throughout this year's troubled election process. Ref A contains Bereket's comments on the Ethiopia-Eritrean border situation, while this message focused on internal politics.

ADG Statement: We Can See Your Good Intentions

[1](#)3. (C) Bereket complimented the Charge on the "helpful" ADG statement issued Sept. 13 (Ref B). The GOE had difficulties with some elements, which the Minister insinuated had been inserted by EU missions, but he concluded that "you can see the intent. You want us to move forward in the democratic process and you are willing to help." He contrasted the statement with what he called the "unprofessional" statement issued by the EU Observer Mission (EOM). The Charge replied that she wouldn't have been satisfied if the GOE had like everything about the ADG statement. Ethiopia was at a crossroads, and both the GOE and the opposition had a responsibility to advance democracy.

We are Democrats, and Parliament Will Prove It

[1](#)4. (C) The Charge asked whether the opposition would be allowed to play an effective role if parties did decide to take their seats in Parliament. Bereket answered that the GOE was committed to building a democratic society. He claimed that "no one forced us to open up prior to the election. No other African country has done as much." While opposition parties advocated positions unacceptable to the EPRDF, they had the right to express their ideas and would have sufficient space to do so. If the opposition proposed agenda items in parliament with which the GOE did not agree, the ruling coalition could use the opportunity for public debates with their opponents. "If an agenda item adds value," he said, "we'll allow the debate."

Opposition Neither Democratic Nor Moderate

[1](#)5. (C) Bereket charged that opposition complaints about Parliamentary rule changes were just a smokescreen for the parties real intentions: to seize power by unconstitutional means. "They don't have the strength to overthrow us by force, but they are hoping for some skirmish that they can take advantage of." The Minister told the Charge that "you hear there are moderates among the opposition, but who are they?" The CUD's Berhanu Nega had participated in the drafting of some of the opposition's most extreme statements. Bereket claimed that he had asked Berhanu to stake out moderate positions in public, but the CUD leader had refused. The Minister had had similar experiences with UEDF leader Beyene Petros. Petros had seemed moderate, but became

another person in his public statements. Bereket claimed that current opposition parties remained too closely aligned with former leaders of the repressive DERG regime, and would have to be sidelined -- democratically, of course -- before a genuine, constitutional opposition could emerge. Current opposition leaders called the Ethiopian Constitution "Stalinist", a charge Bereket rejected. The Minister charged that Amhara CUD leaders like Hailu Shawal did not accept the reality of a modern, multi-ethnic Ethiopia. DERG elements were now intervening in, and basically controlling, the CUD's meetings with constituents. They were also controlling "moderates" like Berhanu, Bereket said.

If Opposition Respects Constitution, Reforms Are Possible

16. (C) The Charge pointed out that public perceptions of what represented "old" and "new" in Ethiopian politics seemed quite different than the Minister's characterization. A government that had been in power for fourteen years was bound to accumulate problems and political baggage. The GOE appeared to face a tremendous challenge in this sense. The Charge asked whether there was anything that the GOE could do to strengthen the position of so-called moderates in the opposition, while at the same time burnishing its own public and international image. Even reaffirming in public some of the same commitments that Bereket had just made would help, she added. She also referred to the Carter Center Report's recommendations, and noted that it would be good for the GOE to recapture the image of a government moving forward on democratization. Pol/Econ Counselor offered the specific example of re-opening the public media to the opposition, and toning down GOE rhetoric on state radio and television.

17. (C) Bereket responded that "once the opposition agrees to play by the rules, many things are possible." If the GOE "gave them the media" before such a commitment, however, the Minister feared that the opposition leaders would simply issue public calls for violence. The GOE would not be able to monitor all media to prevent such statement, he said. Bereket recalled being burned by CUD and UEDF leaders several months prior after a dialogue brokered by EU Ambassador Tim Clarke. The GOE and opposition figures had labored over a positive, forward-looking joint statement, only to have the opposition depart radically from the script during the press conference and launch attacks on the GOE and the electoral process. Nevertheless Bereket appeared to take the Charge's suggestions on board. He promised to come up with something that the GOE felt comfortable with. "We know you want a stable, democratic ally," the Minister said. "We'll move forward in the right direction. The clouds will disperse."

18. (C) Despite this sunny prediction, however, the Minister's mood turned somewhat darker when discussing the coming weeks. He saw several potential flashpoints, most notably the release of the EOM's final report on elections (note: presumably postponed until sometime after Parliament is to meet as per reftel). Another difficult development would be the consolidation of the CUD from a coalition into a unified party, likely under Hailu Shawel.

Comment: Kinder, Gentler Bereket -- But No Clear Opening

19. (C) Bereket, seen by many as an EPRDF "heavy", took a warmer tone and expressed more receptiveness on democratic reforms than in some previous meetings. His friendlier demeanor appeared to reflect the GOE's basic comfort with the U.S. role in the Ambassadors' Donors Group, as well as the Carter Center report. Nonetheless, Bereket offered no concrete promises on GOE steps to defuse political tensions and continued to reject the legitimacy of Ethiopia's leading opposition parties.

HUDDLESTON